

## The Anchor of Hope in the Barque of St. Peter

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*Ave Crux, Spes Unica!  
Hail the Cross, our Only Hope!*

These words echo in the 6th century hymn *Vexilla Regis*, which was composed to commemorate the arrival of a relic of the True Cross at Queen St. Radegunda's Abbey of the Holy Cross in Poitiers.<sup>1</sup> Over a thousand years later, these words were taken up as the motto of the Congregation of Holy Cross, the religious group that founded my alma mater and countless other schools. Their community seal is a cross, with two anchors extending diagonally outward on either side. The anchor has been a Christian symbol of hope from the very beginning. In Hebrews we read: "[Hope] we have as an anchor for the soul, sure and firm." (Heb 6:19a<sup>2</sup>) Numerous depictions of anchors can be found in the catacombs, and for many centuries during persecution, it was far more common for Christians to use the symbol of the anchor than the symbol of the cross. Much like the ichthus, the anchor was a secret symbol for a group that began with humble origins among fishermen. They knew that an anchor brought safety and assurance in a storm. They knew that an anchor was necessary if you wanted to navigate on the water without getting tossed by the waves. And in the first century, they all knew that Greco-Roman anchors were shaped with two hooked arms and an opposing stock<sup>3</sup>-- like a cross in disguise.

It can seem difficult to feel hopeful today, when news and social media seem to bring all of the world's problems right to our doorstep. We can see that the world is largely turning away from God, as we have done so many times in our past. Religious "nones" are on the rise, pews are emptying, parishes are closing: on paper, things can seem pretty bleak. So today, I would like to reflect with you all on the meaning and importance of "hope," this virtue which anchored our forebears in faith through the trials of persecution and the growing pains of a nascent Church. What can we learn from the very first followers of Jesus about this anchor of hope? We will reflect first on the virtue

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, Michael. "Royal Banners" 22 October, 2017.

<<http://www.preces-latinae.org/thesaurus/Hymni/Vexilla.html>>

<sup>2</sup> All Biblical quotations from *New American Bible With Revised New Testament*. Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, 1986.

<sup>3</sup> "History of Anchor Design." 22 October, 2017. <<http://anchors.synthasite.com/history-1.php>>

of “hope” in the Christian tradition, and then specifically as the word was used by first-century followers of Jesus. Next, we will meditate on the meaning of hope through the life and teachings of St. Peter, our first pope, whom I would like to introduce as the Apostle of Hope. Finally, we will discuss the particular way Pope Francis, as a successor of Peter, continues to lead the Church in catechesis on hope.

## What is Hope?

We first begin by asking, “What is hope?” Hope is one of the three theological virtues, so I’ll start by turning to the Angelic Doctor for help in pinning down what that means. First of all, virtues are divided into three main categories: moral, intellectual and theological. The moral and intellectual virtues are both natural virtues, meaning that they can be acquired by any person through practice-- through the working and obtaining of good habits. This is because these virtues are the perfections of human nature itself, both in regards to reason (intellectual) and in desire (moral). They are directed towards our natural end, towards our natural happiness. Theological virtues, however, surpass the perfection that we can acquire merely through good habits. They direct us towards our supernatural end, which is eternal Beatitude. These are the virtues listed in Corinthians 13: faith, hope and love (charity). Thomas Aquinas says that we call these virtues “theological” for three reasons: “First, because their object is God, inasmuch as they direct us aright to God: secondly, because they are infused in us by God alone: thirdly, because these virtues are not made known to us, save by Divine Revelation contained in Holy Writ.”<sup>4</sup>

So, unlike moral and intellectual virtues which are acquired primarily through habit, theological virtues are infused in us by God precisely for the purpose of surpassing the natural abilities of human nature. Their presence in our lives is the work of the Holy Spirit and unlike natural virtues which must observe the mean, so that we don’t fall into error through deficiency or excess, theological virtues can never be experienced to excess. As the Angelic Doctor states: “Never can we love God as much as He ought to be loved, nor believe and hope in Him as much as we should.”<sup>5</sup> But what does this word “hope” actually mean?

In the New Testament, the word that is used for hope is “elpis” a word which carries the connotation of expectation-- of waiting for something that is certain to occur. This is very different from the way we might use “hope” in English: “I hope I get an A on that test!”

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. I-II, Q.62, Art. 1

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. I-ii-, Q. 64, Art. 4

We use 'hope' to express a desire for something to happen, which "elpis" also contains-- but with the added assurance that the thing we desire WILL happen. Think about the Biblical sense of "hope" less in the English subjunctive ("*I wish...*") and more along the lines of the giddy can't-sleep-excitement of children waiting for Christmas morning. Paul writes that we should "Rejoice in hope!" (Romans 12:12) We would do well to ask ourselves: when was the last time I woke up and made a morning offering to my Heavenly Father with the same excitement as a child who wakes his father on Christmas morning?

We should also note that the words "faith," "hope" and "trust" are almost interchangeable in the New Testament. The word for 'faith' is "pistis," which is faith in something or someone that is built on the firm assurance of trust, so to have faith in something or someone is to trust completely. To place our faith and trust is to find deep, abiding hope. In Hebrews 11:1, we are told:

Ἔστιν δὲ πίστις ἐλπιζομένων ὑπόστασις  
"Faith is the substance of things hoped for."

The two are inextricably linked because their object is identical; yet according to Aquinas, in the order of generation, faith *must* precede hope. Before we can rejoice in the promises God has given and anticipate their fulfillment, we must first decide to trust the One who makes the promises. So you can see that even if theological virtues are infused by God, they still require an act of the will to consent to their workings in our life.

Finally, faith and hope also have the unique distinction of being the only two virtues that will no longer exist when we are finally in a state of glory. As theological virtues, we've already mentioned that they are ordered towards union with God-- and this means they would no longer serve a purpose when we have attained Beatitude, when our expectations have been fulfilled. Unlike the natural virtues (which perfect us as human beings) and charity (which will remain eternally), we seek to be people of faith and hope in this life so that faith and hope may eventually pass away.

With this understanding of "hope," let us now turn to a few practical questions: what is the content of our hope? What exactly has been promised and why should we look forward to it? Does the Church have the same hope today that it had almost two thousand years ago? To answer these questions, I will now turn to the figure of St. Peter, our first pope.

## Peter as the Apostle of Hope

Compared to some of the other early figures in Christianity, St. Peter has left us very little of his own writing. He did not pen a Gospel, nor did he churn out letters with the acuity and speed of St. Paul. Though academic opinions vary, it is highly likely that the two Epistles of St. Peter found in the New Testament are authentic and hail from Rome in the early 60's.<sup>6</sup> Together they make up a mere eight chapters in Scripture, but within these 166 verses, we have a treasure trove of teaching, especially about hope.

In the first few lines of his first letter, Peter writes to Christian exiles all around Asia minor and encourages them to bless the Lord and to rejoice! For God, "in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope... to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you." (1 Peter 1:3b-4). For Peter, hope is a gift given by God that allows us to delight here and now in the glory that is promised us in the future. Yet in Peter's account, this promise does not permit us to become optimistic to the point of apathy in this life. Rather, because of our firm hope in God's promises, Peter says: "make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, virtue with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance, endurance with devotion, devotion with mutual affection, mutual affection with love." (2 Peter 1:5-7) This hope is meant to strengthen us in our good deeds, build up the community of believers, set an example for unbelievers, and submit to sufferings imposed for the sake of the Gospel. His final exhortation in the second letter is that we should look forward to the coming of Christ with eagerness, for "we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." (2 Peter 3:13)

In these two short letters, we can hear the voice of a man who is completely confident in the message he preaches. He is not afraid to dole out instruction and advice, or to warn of the constant prowl of the devil, or to denounce false teachings with biting critique. Yet we know from the Gospels and Acts that Simon Peter wasn't always so confident and solid. This is a man who was so off-the-mark at times that even Jesus had to rebuke his words as coming from Satan.<sup>7</sup>

Looking at the evidence, perhaps a stronger case could be made for calling Paul the "Apostle of Hope," or even applying this term to Mary Magdalene as Pope Francis has

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<sup>6</sup> See: Vander Heeren, Achille. "Epistles of Saint Peter." The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 11. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1911. 25 Oct. 2017 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11752a.htm>>

<sup>7</sup> See: Matthew 16:22-23

done<sup>8</sup>. But I give this title to Peter because through the whole trajectory of the Gospels and Acts and his own epistles, we can see how the theological virtue of hope is already present in Peter prior to Pentecost. We see that he has a natural inclination to be a person of hope-- of complete and total trust-- even if he doesn't quite yet understand exactly what that hope entails.

So when Simon Peter says to Jesus: "No such thing shall ever happen to you!" (Mt 16:22), perhaps we can read this encounter not as a rash failing on his part, but as proof that he completely and fully believed in his proclamation from just six verses prior. Peter has just told Jesus that he believes He is the "Messiah, the Son of the Living God." (Mt 16:16) His trust in Jesus is so complete that he cannot fathom a crucified Messiah. He refuses to believe that anyone would be able to kill the Son of the Living God. He has the right inclination, but the wrong content, or perhaps the wrong outlook. This is trust, but not yet infused by God's vision.

We see this same inclination on display in John's Gospel, at the end of the Bread of Life discourse in chapter 6. Many of those who heard Jesus' challenging speech simply leave. Jesus turns to the Twelve and says,

*"Do you also want to leave?" Simon Peter answered him, "Master to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67-69)*

Notice that Peter does not say, "Are you kidding? We totally understand what you mean and unlike those other clueless disciples, we have no problem accepting that you just told us to gnaw on your flesh so that we can live forever. Totally cool." His decision to cleave to Jesus is not based on intellectual knowledge and acceptance of the message, but on complete trust in the identity of Jesus himself. It is hope.

I could spend a lot of time enumerating the stories which put Peter's nascent hope on display, but for now I will switch gears and ask you all to meditate with me on the following passages and the art which accompanies them in your handouts.

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<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis. "General Audience," given 17 May 2017. [Libreria Editrice Vaticana](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences). 25 Oct. 2017. <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences)>

I. Walking on Water- Matthew 14:22-33



*We tend to focus on the moment when Peter doubts, when Jesus rebukes him for having such little faith. Yet we can forget that for a few moments, Peter was walking on water!*

II. Denial- art by Carl Bloch- Luke 22:54-62



*Betrayal, denial and abandonment mark Jesus' final hours here on earth. Peter's threefold denial seems to drive a wedge between him and all of the hope he has professed in Jesus up to this point. This is his moment of failure. He weeps. Yet what sets him apart from Judas, whom Matthew tells us "deeply regretted what he had*

done?” (Mt 27:3) Both men commit a great sin against God, both men repent. Why is Judas held in such low regard and Peter celebrated as the first pope? Dante’s *Inferno* places Judas in the Ninth Circle of Hell, along with the worst betrayers and their benefactors.<sup>9</sup> Yet tradition holds that Judas was not thrown into Hell for his betrayal, but for his despair at ever being forgiven. Was it Peter’s hope and trust in Christ that gave him the strength to run to the tomb on Easter morning?

### III. “Feed My Sheep”- John 21:1-7



*Peter is yet again in the water, but this time he has thrown himself in eagerly so to arrive first at the shore. While there, Peter’s hope of being forgiven is fulfilled. As a remedy for his threefold denial, Peter is thrice permitted to confirm his abundant love for Christ.*

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<sup>9</sup> See: Alighieri, Dante. “Inferno” *Divine Comedy*. Canto XXXIV.



In light of these, and so many other stories we could tell about Peter, we can see that Simon the fisherman is an exemplary model of trust. Even before he receives the Holy Spirit and finally comes to understand what Jesus' life, death and resurrection has prepared for him, my favorite Patron Saint of Teacher's Pets<sup>10</sup> shows us how to model a spirit of hope in our own lives. We may not always get the right answers, but if we stay close to Jesus and learn to follow Him no matter what the cost, we will have great reason for hope.

Lest you think I'm negligent and overlooked one of the most popularly-quoted texts from Peter's epistles, I now ask us all to think about the depth of meaning behind Peter's exhortation to us:

"Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope." (1 Peter 3:14)

Peter does not ask us to always be ready to debate the 95 Theses. Or to be ready to grill the Jehovah's Witnesses at the door. Or to have Deuterocanonical texts at the ready to show those heretic Protestants why we should pray for the dead. Maybe there are times and places for these, but *always* be ready to give a reason for your hope, because if you live so that people see your hope, they will be intrigued by it. They will wonder what gives you the strength to persevere in tribulation, to keep your gaze forward when so much of the world is gazing down and inward. Peter's answer is that he has hope because he was *there*. He reminds the other Christians that he "heard [the Father's] voice come from heaven while we were with [Jesus] on the mountain." (2 Peter 1:18). From sinking into the depths of the ocean to glorifying God on the heights of the mountain, Peter has witnessed and experienced the love and power of Christ. This is the reason for his hope.

## Hope for Today

So, how is it that we can bring Peter's model of hope into our present life? How can we bring hope to a world that needs it so desperately, but seems increasingly deaf to its call? If our first pope can be seen as a model and Apostle of Hope, then perhaps it is wise to look to his successors for examples and teaching on hope in the modern world.

I believe we can all draw strength and encouragement from the life and teachings of Pope Saint John Paul II, whose biography by George Weigel was even titled "Witness

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<sup>10</sup> Not a real patronage, as far as I know.

to Hope.” We have received an incredibly rich and challenging deposit of teaching through Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on the topic of hope, which is condensed and beautifully presented in his 2008 encyclical, “Spe Salvi: Saved in Hope.” Most recently, the Church has been led to reflect on hope through the general audiences of Pope Francis, who began a catechesis on Christian hope during Advent last year, and just concluded the catechesis this past Wednesday.

It is to the current successor of St. Peter I would now like to turn, for while Francis’ presentation on hope is very different from that of Peter’s, many of the themes, images, and practical suggestions remain the same.

On December 7th, 2016, Pope Francis opened his catechesis by drawing a contrast between hope and optimism. “Optimism disappoints,” he states, “but hope does not!”<sup>11</sup> This is the surety which Peter also highlight in his epistles. As we go week by week through the catechesis, we see that the content of this hope is exactly the same as that described by Peter in the first century: it is a hope in heaven, in the universal resurrection and the coming kingdom of God. It is hope that is grounded in Christ’s passion and Resurrection, given first to us through baptism and in all of the sacraments.

Yet Pope Francis has a particular emphasis in his message which speaks to our modern hearts: he is aware that for us, the earthly life of Jesus is an historical event long passed. In writing to early Christian communities, Peter knew that not everyone had personally met Jesus during the three years of ministry, but the events were fresh: Jesus was a man who occupied the same physical space and time as those people. Early Christians heard first-hand testimonies from witnesses of the Resurrection, including Peter. They had very concrete individuals to trust in, who in turn had very concrete relationships with a particular carpenter from Nazareth.

So Francis emphasizes for us that while hope can be contained in many doctrinal statements, the thing that matters is that “our hope is a person.”<sup>12</sup> Our hope is not *in* a person, but our hope is given and fulfilled by the same person: Jesus Christ, who is God and man. And far from being a remote, transcendent person, Jesus is Emmanuel: GOD WITH US. Our hope is an expectation of fulfilled promises in the future, but it is experienced as a deepened awareness of God’s presence even in this life. When we

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<sup>11</sup> Pope Francis. *General Audience* given on 7 December, 2016. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 26 October, 2017. <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences)>

<sup>12</sup> Pope Francis. *General Audience* given on 5 April, 2017. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 26 October, 2017. <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences)>

make the choice to accept the gift of hope, we are opening ourselves up to God in a very radical way.

Making this choice requires a lot from us. Pope Francis does not pretend that this choice is easy, especially in today's world. He reminds us that having the strength to walk with God in trust requires regular prayer and discernment. He particularly commends to us the recitation of the Jesus Prayer, which reorients us to Christ's vision so that we can turn away from sin and grief and look towards "the horizon of hope."<sup>13</sup> Hope also requires immense patience in our waiting, while simultaneously asking us to be joyfully expectant. Francis is not afraid to embrace the paradox of hope today: we must be prepared to wait a long time for Jesus, yet we must also anticipate His coming at any moment. Hope means that we trust in things to happen which, "from the human point of view, [seem] uncertain and unpredictable."<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps the most salient feature of Francis' catechesis on hope, however, is an aspect of Christianity that had not yet come to bloom in Peter's time. For Peter and the first Christians, the Church was a small, but growing movement, that required firm commitment to spreading the Good News. Creeds needed to be constructed. Converts needed to be won. Behaviours and ideas needed to be reformed quickly, so that we could be ready for the Kingdom. Christians were persecuted, tortured, put to death: there was much suffering for the sake of the Gospel-- as there is in many parts of the world today. Being a "witness" to others was a first priority during Peter's time.

As the centuries passed and Christianity was drawn out of the shadow of persecution, another spirituality was given room to flourish. The time-space gap was beginning to be felt by Christians in Europe, who greatly desired to find physical roots in their faith. They wanted to see the place where Jesus lived, breathe the air, feel the Sea of Galilee wash over their toes. And so, the "pilgrim" was born. To travel to Jerusalem was more than just a physical journey: it was a journey towards Christ Himself, a spiritual undertaking that itself was a form of prayer. From these experiences, Christianity not only developed a rich history and tradition of pilgrimages, but we began to speak of ourselves all as pilgrim people: this life on earth is our journey, a path we walk with God as our guide.

And so with this later addition, the Church's understanding of "hope" is fortified. It remains an anchor, that steadfast symbol of safety and security in the storms around

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<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis. *General Audience* given on 27 September, 2017. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 26 October, 2017. <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences)>

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis. *General Audience* given on 29 March, 2017. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 26 October, 2017. <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences)>

us, but in that exterior stillness, it gains an interior movement. We don't just look towards our goal: we move towards it. This notion of pilgrimage in hope resounds throughout Francis' catechesis. He says that we are all on a path, on a road going towards God, and that as a Christian community, the Church must be attentive to others and to the presence of Christ who accompanies us. "Jesus is always beside us to give us hope," he says, "to warm our hearts and say: 'Go ahead, I am with you. Go ahead.'"<sup>15</sup>

So the image I would like to leave you with today is that the barque of our Church, birthed under the leadership of St. Peter, is equipped with hope as both an anchor and a sail. "If the anchor is what gives the boat its stability," says Francis, "the sail is instead what makes it move and advance on the waters. Hope is truly like a sail; it gathers the wind of the Holy Spirit and transforms it into a driving force that propels the boat"<sup>16</sup> so that we all may arrive safely on the shores of eternal life.

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<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis. *General Audience* given on 24 May, 2017. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 26 October, 2017. <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences)>

<sup>16</sup> Pope Francis. *General Audience* given on 31 May, 2017. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 26 October, 2017. <[vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences](http://vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences)>